



COMMISSION ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH

March 25, 2019

Greetings from the Commission on Children and Youth!

On February 7, 2019, the Montgomery County Commission on Children and Youth hosted the 12th Annual **Youth Having a Voice Roundtable** at the Silver Spring Civic Building. Over 50 middle and high students from across the county attended and shared their experiences and opinions regarding public transportation, school safety, and mental health and wellness. This year the Commission has focused its work on these three identified areas and subcommittees were formed to explore the topics, narrow the scope, and make recommendations for the needs of our county's children and youth.

Our first subcommittee, the Mental Health and Wellness Subcommittee, has spent the past two years exploring ways to promote a positive approach to mental health and well-being. Our second subcommittee, the School Safety Subcommittee, is focused on balancing psychological and physical safety in Montgomery County schools and providing a safe environment for students during non-instructional hours, including after school activities on campus. By bringing these conversations to the youth at the Roundtable, our subcommittees are afforded the opportunity to gather valuable information that will be used, in conjunction with input from several professionals, to make recommendations to the County Council, County Executive and the Board of Education. The School Safety Subcommittee plans to share preliminary recommendations with the Board of Education prior to the close of the current academic year.

Our third subcommittee, comprised of our youth commissioners, spearheaded an effort to explore youth experiences with public transportation in Montgomery County, specifically examining the Kids Ride Free and Youth Cruiser SmarTrip programs. Youth responses were gathered both at the Roundtable event and from an online survey. The youth commissioners had the opportunity to share their preliminary findings with members of the Transportation and Environment Committee and leadership from the Montgomery County Department of Transportation. The youth commissioners will continue collecting data via the online survey and in the next few months will begin formulating specific recommendations that will support youth having greater and more reliable access to public bus service in Montgomery County.

We appreciate you taking the time to review the attached summary of the **Youth Having A Voice Roundtable** Event. We also look forward to sharing our recommendations in the Commission on Children and Youth Annual Report in November 2019.

Sincerely,

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Youth Commissioners, Commission on Children and Youth

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12th Annual Youth Having A Voice Roundtable
Hosted by the Commission on Children and Youth
February 7, 2019

The Commission on Children and Youth is dedicated to its mission of promoting the well-being of Montgomery County's children, youth and families so that all young people may realize their full potential and become contributing, productive adults. Every year we host the ***Youth Having A Voice Roundtable*** event to hear directly from the youth and children of the county. On February 7, 2019, our commission held the 12th annual ***Youth Having a Voice Roundtable*** at the Silver Spring Civic Building. We had over 50 youth attend the event, from middle and high schools across the county. Councilmember Evan Glass and Councilmember Gabe Albornoz and members of their staff attended the event. Ms. Pamela Luckett attended on behalf of Councilmember Will Jawando. Other distinguished attendees included Ms. Shebra Evans, President of the Montgomery County Board of Education, Ms. Jeanette E. Dixon, Montgomery County Board of Education, Ms. Victoria Buckland, Acting Director of the Department of Health and Human Services, Ms. JoAnn Barnes, Chief of Children, Youth and Families, Dr. Barbara Andrews, Administrator of Early Childhood Services, as well as Dr. Jonathan Brice, Associate Superintendent from the Office of Student and Family Support and Engagement.

This year, the Commission on Children and Youth has been focusing on two main areas of interest: mental health and wellness and school safety. We chose these main focus areas because we believe that these are some of the greatest issues affecting Montgomery County youth. Separately, the Youth Leadership Subcommittee, which is comprised of 4 youth commissioners, is currently focusing on public transportation options, partially due to its impacts on school safety. We, the youth commissioners, recently met with the Transportation and Environment Committee of the County Council and offered recommendations regarding future expansion of the Kids Ride Free programs. The Roundtable, in addition to an online survey, was used to collect information about how kids currently use public transportation programs.

Public Transportation

At the Roundtable, when asking the youth participants questions about public transportation, we found that a mere 4 out of over 50 kids knew what the *Youth Cruiser SmarTrip Card* is—a program that is being used to phase out the use of student IDs for public transportation use in the future. We determined that this was due to the limited and somewhat confusing information provided on the Department of Transportation website as well as general lack of public awareness. In addition, we realized how restrictive the current *Kids Ride Free* Program is since many kids rely on public transportation on the weekends, holidays, and times outside of the set 2:00-8:00 PM. We also found that bus drivers are sometimes unfamiliar with the specifics of these programs, as multiple students shared stories of being “kicked off of buses” or not allowed to ride during designated times.

School Safety

In addition to discussing transportation, a 35-minute portion of the evening was dedicated to the subject of school safety. The participants were told to think of safety in a broad way, including safety from physical violence as well as psychological safety from harassment, bullying, intimidation, discrimination, or ridicule. A majority of students reported a “moderate” feeling of safety within their school. Of those who did not report feeling safe, most students’ concerns were regarding bullying and intimidation and fights between students. Students also reported feeling unsafe during lockdown drills, which they believed were not taken seriously enough by both students and teachers. Another concern that students shared was with regards to the safety concerns with their school facility, citing specifics such as gas leaks and broken pipes.

One of the school safety subcommittee’s primary concerns was examining safety during afterschool hours so roundtable participants were asked to comment on school safety afterschool. Participants generally felt less safe after school hours, as security guards and school resource officers had left for the day. Most students that felt safe during these times mentioned trusted adults that they were with; those who didn’t often said they did not stay after school for this reason.

Mental Health & Wellness

Finally, the Roundtable addressed the topic of mental health and wellness. When asked to describe what mental health meant to them, the students referred “it was their state of mind” and “what they think and feel.” Even early in the discussion, students indicated that they understood the fact that mental health is a sensitive subject. One student noted that it isn’t something people can control and that if other students chose to bully other regarding their mental health, it would be appropriate to confront the bullies. Additionally, students generally agreed that school was one of the major stressors in their lives. Tests, homework, and extracurriculars every day left many students feeling frustrated.

Roundtable participants were also asked what they would do if a friend came to them for help regarding a crisis or of a situation that was making them feel stressed. Many students reported that they wouldn’t immediately tell an adult but would instead prefer to handle the situation themselves. Participants also said that even if they themselves were feeling stressed or overwhelmed, they would talk with their trusted friends as opposed to adults, although some students shared that they had one or two teachers or school staff, such as coaches, they trusted. These students claimed that they were able to build a trusting relationship with these identified adults because the adult was genuinely interested in the well-being of their students. Interestingly, when specifically asked if they would talk with their school guidance counselors about mental health concerns, almost all said they would not. When asked why, students brought up many good points. While conceding that some adults were trained and experienced, the participants noted that they (the adults) don’t understand the issue the same way students do. One extremely important idea that many students agreed upon is that teachers and counselors are often required to respond in a certain way with a specific protocol. This often escalates the situation further, something the students don’t necessarily want.

The Commission considered the ***Youth Having A Voice Roundtable*** event to be a huge success with a great deal of important data being collected from the youth participants. The Commission plans on examining the data collected and will use it to generate recommendations to share with County decision makers in order to better the county's policies regarding mental health, public transportation, and school safety.